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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000299

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PREF BM SK

SUBJECT: MANDALAY: NON-BUDDHISTS NEED NOT APPLY

REF: A. RANGOON 287

B. RANGOON 248

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As part of our Mandalay Outreach Week (ref A), we met with Christian leaders in Mandalay on March 1 to discuss religious issues in central Burma. They described the tight restrictions local authorities place on religious meetings and church construction, as well as general GOB discrimination against Christians and overt promotion of Buddhism. Regime authorities recently arrested three pastors for building churches. Two others are now in prison for offering overnight shelter to North Koreans seeking asylum. The attitude of the regional military commander governs all religious matters, as well as the everyday lives of Mandalay citizens. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) During an Embassy Outreach Week in Mandalay (ref A), local Christian leaders met with Emboffs at YMCA headquarters on March 1. The group included mostly ethnic pastors of several churches and Christian laypersons. They are members of a local chapter of the national Myanmar Council of Churches and meet regularly to promote peace and understanding in the community. Another interfaith group in Mandalay includes Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims.

¶3. (C) During recent Buddhist-Muslim communal riots south of Mandalay (ref B), the religious leaders heard that an entire Muslim village fled to the monastery of a friendly monk to request protection from the riots. However, they added, the government's news blackout made it difficult to obtain precise information on what happened. They claimed that one chronic irritant to Buddhist sensitivities is the Muslim community's ritual sacrifice of large numbers of animals on Islamic holidays.

#### A REGIME STRAITJACKET

¶4. (C) Local authorities who report to the regional military commander closely control all meetings by Christians in Mandalay. To hold a general meeting congregations must acquire advance permission and provide authorities with minute program details, including the name of their pianist and what songs they will play. Authorities recently banned a birthday party at a local hotel, claiming that because a Christian was the honoree it was a religious event and belonged in a church. Christian leaders told us that because Mandalay authorities consider their city to be a historic bastion of Buddhist culture, they emphasize Buddhism and repress other religions in the region.

¶5. (C) Burma has complex land right laws and the government exploits them to restrict Christians from building new churches or even boundary walls. For example, authorities recently arrested three pastors near Mandalay for building new churches and charged them with violating land laws, rather than religious regulations. A Chin businessman told us that authorities in Chin State had also jailed three of his relatives for building new churches. Authorities also arrested local pastor Htoo Htoo of Grace Church in Mandalay and another pastor's driver for providing overnight shelter to North Koreans who entered Burma illegally. The authorities charged them for "failure to report foreigners staying overnight" and sentenced each to two years imprisonment.

¶6. (C) The leaders noted that Christians in cities usually face an easier time than those in rural areas, and churches that register with the government face fewer restrictions. The regime is particularly concerned about people in rural areas converting to Christianity. To counter this, the government actively supports Buddhist missionaries, who distribute food and other incentives to gain converts, although the Christian leaders admitted that Christians engage in similar strategies.

¶7. (C) Both the local government and the military openly discriminate against Christians. Although there is no written policy, the Defense Services Academy in nearby Pyin-Oo-Lwin does not accept non-Buddhist applicants. The Burmese Army pressures Christian soldiers to become Buddhists or resign, and non-Buddhists have no hope of promotion to

officer rank. A military commander told a Buddhist military officer that his Christian wife would have to convert to Buddhism or he would have to resign. The Christian leaders also reported that a high school student recently reached the division finals of an intramural competition, but when authorities learned his name was Alexander, they assumed he was Christian and disqualified him from participating further.

THE PHARAOH IS UNPOPULAR

18. (C) The pastors also complained that the new Central Region Commander, Major General Khin Zaw, has issued several unpopular orders and lacks popular respect. In one case, he imposed a curfew and ordered all businesses to close by 11:00 p.m. Since Mandalay is hot and there frequently is no electricity, the local population likes to go out at night when the temperature drops for late dinners and chats in tea stalls. The pastors also complained that the electricity supply to Mandalay has grown worse recently, claiming the GOB is diverting power from Mandalay to the new capital of Pyinmana. Mandalay now receives reliable electricity only one day out of three on average.

19. (C) COMMENT: The quality of life in each Burmese division or state tends to reflect the personality of its all-powerful regional military commander. None of Mandalay's Christian leaders felt the current commander was open-minded. The GOB's active promotion of Buddhism further disadvantages those of other faiths, but Christians and Muslims in Mandalay Division continue to fight for a better future life. The recent riots between Buddhist and Muslims in southern Mandalay Division show that religious and ethnic conflicts continue to smolder and could ignite at any time. END  
COMMENT.

STOLTZ